

Towns feeling the effect from cranberry woes

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CARVER — The downturn in the cranberry business has officials in some area towns seeing red.

In Carver, cranberry bog workers, who often double as call firefighters, are being laid off and taking full-time jobs outside town, forcing the department to spend more to cover its stations.

Duxbury, which owns 51 acres of cranberry bogs, will reduce its share of revenues from the harvest to help the growers who lease the bogs recoup their costs.

Kingston won't make any money from cranberries this year, but will at least break even.

And throughout Southeastern Massachusetts, the threats of suburban sprawl, traffic and pollution loom as cash-strapped growers face the possibility of selling tens of thousands of acres of land to real estate developers.

Carver's problems stem from its reliance on an "all-call" fire department, in which firefighters on call are paid only for responding to fires or other emergencies. It is one of the

last communities in the state that still relies on such a system.

As more of those firefighters, once employed by cranberry growers, take day jobs, fewer are available to respond to daytime fires, Fire Chief Dana Harriman said.

He has asked for an additional \$25,000 to staff the central station with one call firefighter during week-day hours.

"These guys are getting jobs to pay taxes," Harriman said. "Two in the department have been laid off so far. When they take jobs out of town, they are not available during the day to respond to fires. I'm moving more stations to get adequate manpower for brush or car fires."

All stations and firefighters respond to building fires, he said.

Harriman wants to address the problem before it begins to affect response times.

"The shift will be rotated among current call firefighters interested in working the duty," he said. "It's better than hiring a full-time firefighter and having to lay him off when the situation changes."

Please see CRANBERRY — Page 9

Cranberry woes affect Carver's fire department

■ CRANBERRY

Continued from Page 1

Carver's call system has saved it millions of dollars over the cost of running a department staffed with full-time firefighters.

Duxbury's troubles, and those of next-door Kingston, are less drastic.

Two leases on bogs owned by Duxbury were up for renewal this year, and the town feared it would not attract any bidders, Town Manager Rocco Longo said. Without the growers, Longo said, the town would not have the resources or the expertise to maintain the bogs, and the crop could ultimately be lost.

"We need the support of the farmers to maintain the bogs," Longo said. "We were happy to get one (bid) per bog."

So, in order to make the lease arrangement more appealing to growers, the town negotiated a deal in its new contracts that enables growers to recoup the costs of producing the berries before the town takes a cut of the revenues. In past years, the town simply negotiated with growers for a set percentage of the cranberry revenues.

This year was Kingston's introduction to the cranberry business.

"Obviously we picked a great year to get in," said Douglas Dondero, a member of the town's conservation commission.

Though the town didn't make any money this year in leasing its 25 acres of newly acquired cranberry bogs, Dondero said, it at least managed to break even.

The problems all stem from a collapse in cranberry prices from more than \$80 per 100-pound barrel three years ago to about \$15 in 1999. The industry blames overproduction

and imports.

The industry crisis has even prompted Ocean Spray, a growers' cooperative and the nation's largest producer, to consider sale or merger with a larger corporate parent.

And for the growers themselves, the ongoing crisis has forced many to do what was once unthinkable: sell their bogs and the surrounding land for development.

One of the state's largest growers, A.D. Makepeace of Wareham, has filed subdivision plans for more than 12,000 acres in Plymouth, Carver, Wareham and Middleboro.

Although Makepeace has said it is in no hurry to develop the land, the announcement last year panicked many local officials who fear the prospect of thousands of new house lots being dumped on the market and the resulting population boom that would overtax local services such as schools, police and firefighting.

Harriman said the Carver Fire Department's manpower problem could be a serious blow to what's left of the "all-call" system, which served the state's smaller rural communities for decades.

Town Administrator Richard LaFond said a similar move in the town's all call ambulance service improved response times in that department.

"We spent \$50,000 to \$55,000 to pay one emergency medical technician to stay at the ambulance barn 24 hours a day," LaFond said. "The move cut two minutes off our response times and we haven't had any trouble manning the shifts within the call department."

LaFond said Harriman's \$25,000 request was less expensive than hiring two full-time firefighters to cover the daytime shift.